



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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February 17, 2010

Ash Wednesday

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: 2 Samuel 24:10-25

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 51a

Second Lesson: Revelation 3:14-22

Gospel: Luke 18:9-14

### The Foolish Wisdom of the Cross

Have you ever heard someone raise the question, "If God is all powerful, can God create a stone that not even he can lift?" That's pretty clever, huh? Here is one of the creatures God has created all of a sudden coming up with something God couldn't possibly do. We really pulled one over on the Creator, didn't we?

The wisdom of man, the philosophers of this age that try to use their intellect to come up with explanations for how the universe works and whether or not there are questions such as "Is there a God," would use a question like this to point out the foolishness of believing in God, the foolishness of saying that God is Almighty.

It really shouldn't surprise us that people come up with things like this. In fact, God had a name for them in Scripture. He calls these kinds of statements the mysteries of the faith. Mystery, not in the sense that you have to go get the Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew to solve it, but mystery in the sense of something that you can't figure out, something that human reason cannot deduce and examine and come up with a logical explanation, something that has to be revealed by God and then simply believed. This one about rocks and inert objects, God creating and trying to lift, that's not the only one. There are a lot more than that. Every now and then maybe we hear one and we take a step back and think for a second because it takes us a moment to remember, "Oh yeah, that's another matter of faith, not a matter of human reason."

But think about it, we've looked at lots of them from Scripture, haven't we? "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one*" (Deuteronomy 6:4 and Mark 12:29); yet God reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, three persons. I can't rationally explain that. God tells us that in, with and under the bread and the wine there is his very body and blood that was given and poured out for us. Can I explain that to you? No, he just says it happens. God cannot die and yet this is one of the things we focus on in Lent, isn't it? God dies on the cross for our sin. The Book of Psalms tells us that God neither slumbers nor sleeps, yet when that storm came when Jesus was in the boat, where was he? Sound asleep. How can all this be? It's simply a matter of the mysteries of the faith, things that we believe because this is what God says.

In the school of the Holy Spirit, we've learned to believe these things, not because we check our brains at the door and we're some backward superstitious lot of people like many would have you believe. Rather, we believe them because the Spirit has worked

this trust in our hearts. God has led us to put our trust in the wisdom of God, the power of God, which the world looks at and considers foolishness. *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing”* Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 1:18). *“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”* (1 Corinthians 1:29.)

But this evening, I want you to think about an even bigger contradiction that we’ll look at throughout Lent. God is loving, absolutely, perfectly loving. And God is at the same time holy and just and if he says sin has to be punished, then sin has to be punished. God reveals himself in reality as an oxymoron, one who punishes sin and one who forgives sin. That foolishness of God can really only be understood as Paul told us this evening, because *“we preach Christ crucified”* (1 Corinthians 1:23). During Lent, we will consider this great truth, *“we preach Christ crucified”* (1 Corinthians 1:23).

As we look at these things this evening, we see that our wisdom that considers God’s message at times foolishness bumps up against a lot of the people that were around Jesus during his suffering and his death. *“Where is the wise man”* (1 Corinthians 1:20) Paul wrote in what I just read to you. Pilate was a politician. He was a pretty wise politician. He wanted to handle things expediently. He didn’t believe the charges that the Jews brought against Jesus. He thought he was an innocent man. Yet, in his wisdom, what did he decide to do? Splash a little water on his hands and say, “I am innocent of this man’s innocent blood. Let the blood be on your head because I know he didn’t do anything. But I want to keep the peace and I want to keep the emperor off my back, so go ahead. Do what you want with him. I don’t care.” Here is Pilate, breathing the same air as the guy who is the way, the truth and the life, and he has the audacity in his wisdom to just shake off to the side, “What is truth? What is wisdom? I’m just going to look out and take care of number one. I don’t care what kind of weird dreams my wife has. This has nothing to do with it.” Human wisdom said, “Just let him be crucified. It’s better for him to be dealt with even though he is innocent rather than me having to deal again with the Jews and with Caesar.”

Paul wrote, *“Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?”* (1 Corinthians 1:20). Think about those two things. The scholar builds off of someone else’s knowledge. Other people have learned these things, wrote these truths, and they study them and learn from them. A philosopher looks at the ways of the world and tries to come up with answers to who am I, why are we here, why do we exist, where are we going, all that kind of stuff. But they do it all from the perspective of human intellect, fallen human intellect, intellect that has fallen and was ruined by the fall into sin. It’s no wonder that any man-made religion or philosophy offers us no assured confidence of salvation because when you end up looking at yourself, you see the filthy rottenness. How can you be sure of anything except that you are going to be unsure?

Caiaphas looked at Jesus. He didn’t see a guy that was there for the forgiveness of the sins of the world. He saw someone who made him think it’s better if one man dies and the nation continues and the temple is still standing rather than to bring down the Romans on us and have our temple be destroyed. *“It is better for you that one man die for*

*the people than that the whole nation perish*" he said (John 11:50). So in his philosophy of life, he was doing God a favor by working to have Jesus killed.

*"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"* Paul said (1 Corinthians 1:20). *"Jews demand miraculous signs"* Paul wrote for us (1 Corinthians 1:21). Remember Herod? Giddy, all excited like a kid in a candy shop because he wants to see Jesus do some of these miracles he has heard about. Maybe he'll change something into something or heal somebody or do something really cool and then he'll be able to tell all kinds of great stories. So he's all excited to see these miraculous signs. Then Jesus gets there, and what does he do? He doesn't say a word. The demand for miraculous signs is met with incredible silence. He sends him away angry and frustrated.

This demand for miraculous signs, it's not just the Jews. Is that us sometimes? Do we ever say, "God, if only you would do this, then I will put my trust in you"? Or, have you ever in the infancy of your faith thought that those crowds that were mocking Jesus kind of hit the nail on the head when they said, "If you are the Christ, come down from the cross and then we'll believe in you." Did you ever think to yourself, "Maybe he should have just performed that one last miraculous sign and then maybe they would have believed in him." He had already raised the dead and he had already calmed the seas. He had already exercised demons. He had already done all these other miracles and it was met with apathy and rejection. He had just recently raised Lazarus from the dead. They saw it with their own eyes and said, "Now we have to kill him because if he goes around raising the dead, everyone is going to listen to him." When these signs are rejected because people are relying on human wisdom, if they don't have Spirit-worked faith to believe what their eyes can't understand or what their ears that hear can't understand, when everything has to be explained logically and rationally and you don't have the Spirit of God, it's all foolishness. None of it's going to make any sense. *"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"* (1 Corinthians 1:20).

Now consider the foolishness of God. God, in his foolishness, is wiser than man's wisdom. Here is the foolishness of God. Consider what God says about himself in Exodus 34. He preached a sermon on his own name, the Lord. He said, *"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin"* (Exodus 34:6,7). That's easy to understand, right? God is absolutely, positively loving, absolutely, positively compassionate. He forgives.

Then he continues in the same exact verse and says, *"Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation"* (Exodus 34:7). He says he is compassionate, but he also says that he is just and holy and will punish sin. Here is the thing that the wisdom of the world is going to trip over time and time and time again. How can God be the one who forgives all sin and punishes all sin at the same exact time?

There's only one way you and I can even begin to scratch an understanding of this. It comes from *"we preach Christ crucified"* (1 Corinthians 1:23). In the cross, God took the

perfect Son of God, God took himself, who lived perfectly, who never sinned, and he gave that perfection, and he credited that perfection, that holiness, to us. He gave us what he demands of us. Then he took all of our sins, all of our doubts, all of our trust and our own human reason, he took every last one of the times that we think we know better than God what he should do, how we know what a loving God should do and not do, he took every last one of those filthy rotten sins and put them on Jesus and punished Jesus instead of punishing us. Then he treated us as he should have treated his innocent Holy Son. He considers us holy and declares us forgiven.

*"We preach Christ crucified"* (1 Corinthians 1:23). This is the foolish wisdom of the cross. This is where we get this understanding that we, who are filthy rotten sinners who have nothing to offer God, find a God who loves and forgives us because he punished himself instead of us. Not only do we see what true wisdom is, even though we can't understand it, we simply believe it because the Spirit lives in our hearts.

But now we have something more. We have what Paul said, "To us who are being saved, it is the power of God." It's our power. As we are lying on our deathbed, this is the power that gives us confidence that when our eyes close and our breathing stops and the heart stops beating, when we awake, we will awake to the perfection of heaven because God punishes and forgives at the same time. He did it in Christ, not on us.

This is our power, not only for sometime in the future when we will face death. This is the power for here and now. This is the power that leads us to go on and continue on even though we live in a sinful world. Living in a sinful world quite often means that the devil, or the wisdom of the world around us, will try to get us to believe that God hasn't kept promises that God hasn't made, "If God truly loves you, why would he allow this, this, or this to happen to you?" Bad things, right?

But here is the thing. God has never, ever promised us that on this side of heaven everything will go the way we want it or everything will be easy or everything will be pain-free or worry-free or difficulty-free. He has never promised that. So when the wisdom of the world says, "If God is love, he must have to do this;" no, the power of the cross gives us the ability to see what God actually has promised and what he hasn't. We can search his Word and know what that Word says and find the power for daily living in this belief that no matter what God allows into our lives on this side of heaven, he HAS promised he will be at our side. He HAS promised he will help us through it. He HAS promised that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

That's a power that goes beyond making a rock you can't lift. If that's how you think you are going to trip God up? That kind of question is for when you were a kid who did finger painting. But how God can be the one that punishes and forgives your sins? And he has done it? That's the eternal question to hold on to and to rejoice in.